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Media Monitor

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The Visible Poor

Media Coverage of the Homeless 1986-1989

How have the media covered the debate over homelessness in America? We analyzed national print and broadcast coverage of the homeless over 28 months, from November 1986 through February 1989. We monitored the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, along with the major news magazines - *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. The coverage totalled 103 television stories lasting 3 hours and 31 minutes and 26 magazine stories with a cumulative 641 column inches.

Major Findings

■ **'Tis the Season** - TV news ran twice as many stories on the homeless from November through February as it did during the other eight months of the year. *Page 2*

■ **The Source's Mouth** - Homeless people themselves were the largest source of information. They were cited more often than local, state, and federal officials combined. *Page 3*

■ **Washington Washout** - One out of four sources blamed government inaction for the problem. Almost two-thirds of the criticism of government policies and programs appeared on ABC. *Page 4*

■ **New York, New York** - TV profiled homeless people in New York City five times as often as anywhere else. *Page 6*

■ **People Like Us** - One in four homeless people featured were children, only one in four was identified as unemployed, and only one in twelve was identified as a drug or alcohol user.

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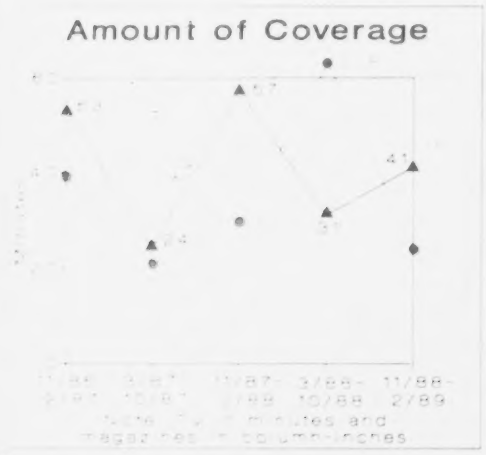
Season's Greetings

We examined all stories on homelessness on the major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts), and news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*) from November 1986 through February 1989 -- a period of two years and four months. During that time the networks devoted 103 stories lasting a total of 3 hours 31 minutes to the topic, and the newsweeklies featured 26 stories covering 641 column inches (the equivalent of about 22 full pages of text with no pictures or headings).



These outlets provide a truly national news agenda on homelessness, as opposed to nationally influential newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which give heavy coverage to local conditions. The lengthy time period was chosen to show the seasonal ebb and flow of coverage, especially on television.

Network coverage of the homeless rose during cold weather periods and fell during warm weather months. Ironically, NBC's Tom Brokaw noted (12/5/86) that homelessness "is not a seasonal phenomenon. It won't go away in the spring or summer." Only the cameras went away.

Magazine coverage was affected less by nature than by politics. Their news of the homeless skyrocketed during 1988 as candidates injected homelessness into the Presidential election. But the saturation coverage during the campaign apparently exhausted the editors' interest. Magazine coverage of homelessness from November 1988 through February 1989 plummeted to just over one-third the total of the preceding warm-weather months (77 vs. 208 column inches), even as the networks were increasing their coverage.

We are watching a Darwinian struggle for survival and the weak are losing.

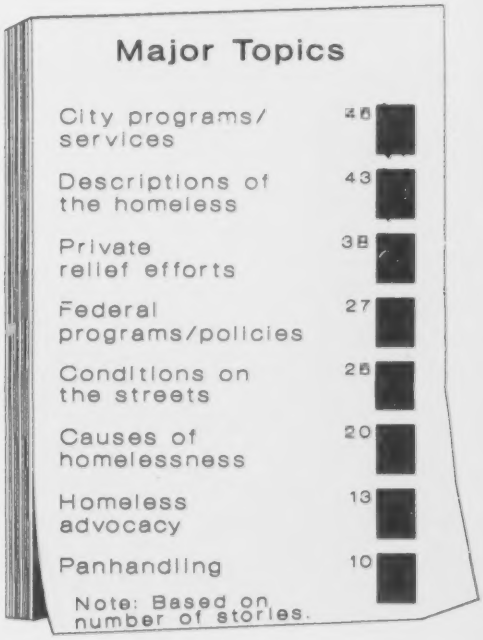
-Bob Hayes
Coalition for Homelessness
Newsweek
3/21/88

It's hard to remember that this is America, not Calcutta.

-Sociologist
U.S. News
8/3/87

Local News

News of the homeless revolved around two questions: Who are they, and what is being done to help them? As a national story, homelessness was really a collection of local stories from around the country, with primary focus on city programs and services (or their absence) and locally based private efforts, rather than federal programs and policies.



A second major topic concerned the characteristics of homeless individuals - their personal backgrounds and social demography. The focus here was descriptive rather than analytical. Discussions of who the homeless are more than

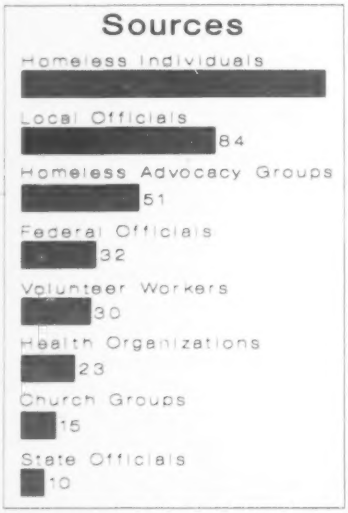
doubled the number of stories on the causes of homelessness. In addition, the coverage was mainly a sympathetic portrayal of people in trouble rather than an arena of policy debate. For example, stories on homeless advocacy groups outnumbered those on such problematic topics as panhandling and the institutionalization of mentally ill "street people".

Government as usual has meant virtual paralysis, no one eager to accept responsibility.

-Susan Spencer
CBS, 1/24/88

Speaking Out

The news on social problems and issues typically relies heavily on official Washington for information and quotations. Homelessness proved an exception to this rule. Local officials outnumbered federal officials as sources, and the homeless themselves outnumbered local, state, and federal officials combined (132 vs. 126 citations).



The story was carried forward by the affected individuals and their advocates rather than the professionals and policy-makers whom reporters often seek out to provide expert testimony on social problems. For example, the organization quoted most often was the National Coalition for Homelessness, an advocacy group whose citations doubled those of the federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Health and Human Services (HHS) combined. Similarly, the flamboyant homeless advocate Mitch Snyder was quoted more often on this topic than either Ronald Reagan or George Bush.

Typical quotations involved homeless people telling their own stories or advocacy groups, volunteer workers describing the difficulties of meeting their needs, and advocates calling for social action. For example: a spokesman from the National Union for the Homeless charged on CBS (1/24/88), "Our history tells us that poverty and homelessness is not going to end until we start to come together and begin to march, begin to go to jail and begin to say to government, 'you cannot function business as usual no more'."

Thus, the homeless story represents a particular genre of reportage -- news from the bottom up, rather than the more typical top-down approach that relies on quotes from recognizable names and officially sanctioned positions of authority.

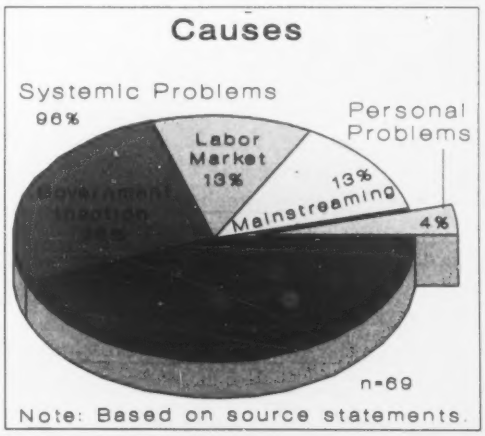
With cutbacks in federal low-income housing, mental health, drug and alcohol programs, the homeless population has exploded.

-Tom Brokaw
ABC, 2/9/89

The System Failed

Although few stories explored the causes of homelessness in depth, many sources (69 in all) offered their opinions. The reasons they cited leaned heavily on structural rather than personal explanations. Only 4% attributed the plight of the homeless to their own personal problems, such as mental illness, lack of motivation, or drug and alcohol abuse.

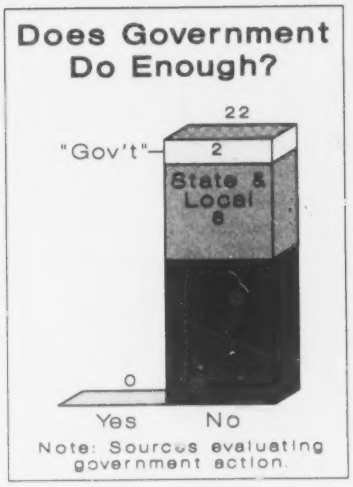
By far the largest number (44%) cited housing market forces, such as high mortgage interest rates, high rents, or disappearing single room occupancy hotels (SRO's), that diminish the supply of affordable housing. For example, CBS's David Dow began one vignette, "The picture in San Diego was sadly familiar -- homeless crowds swollen by downtown redevel-



opment." Next in line for blame (26%) was government inaction, particularly the lack of necessary public services or assistance, along with indictments of bureaucratic callousness or inefficiency in dealing with those unable to shelter themselves, e.g. diminishing or poorly run public housing programs.

The remaining 26% of source comments were evenly divided between labor market forces and mainstreaming of the mentally ill. Labor market forces blamed for homelessness included not only unemployment but low wage scales that made it impossible for some employed people to find or keep affordable housing. Discussions of mainstreaming focused on the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1970's, which released many mentally ill people into the community, and also on the subsequent lack of services that prevented them from fending for themselves.

A notable feature of this discussion was the willingness of reporters themselves to comment on the causes of homelessness. They accounted for 71% of all the reasons presented to explain this phenomenon. As *Time's* Nancy Gibbs wrote, "They are victims of broken and abusive homes, or were squeezed between rising prices and stagnant wages, or were forgotten by an impenetrable bureaucracy." (9/5/88). Normally assertions about the causes of social problems are attributed to experts or advocates. On this topic, journalists proved unusually willing to speak for themselves.

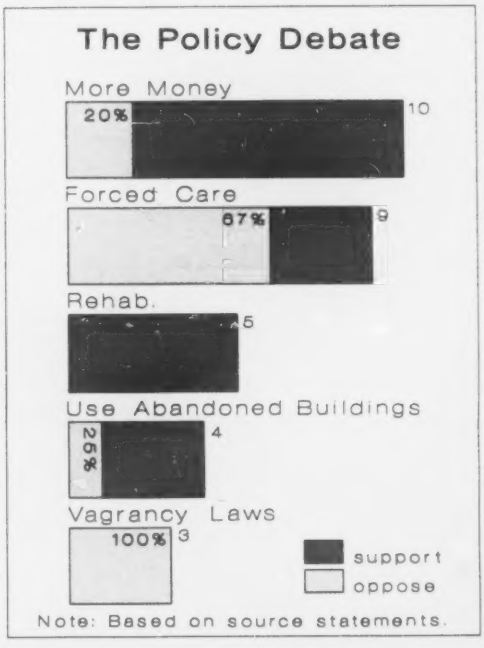


less advocate, "We're kidding ourselves if we think the private sector and the religious community can take care of the problem." NBC's Robert Hager (12/19/88) charged that "the Reagan administration has virtually ignored the law "(requiring the) government to make any temporarily vacant federal building available for shelter space." And *Newsweek's* Tom Mathews asked sarcastically, "How well has the (Reagan) experiment worked? Check the streets or go down to the bus depot some night in winter. You will see for yourself." (3/21/88).

This emphasis on the political system's inadequacy is a natural counterpart to the stress on systemic causes of homelessness. It was presented as a problem to which the system has failed to respond adequately. Specific solutions, however, were rarely debated. The most frequent option raised was the need for more funding, which was endorsed by 8 out of 10 sources. For example, ABC's Peter Jennings reported (2/4/87), "On Capital Hill today, the

The homeless won't get very far unless they can persuade a Republican to break with Ronald Reagan's policies -- or elect a Democrat.

-Tom Mathews
Newsweek
3/21/88



Policy Debate

There was surprisingly little debate over what to do about homelessness, aside from general assertions that government was not doing enough to help. Twenty-two sources addressed the government's role, and all 22 found it wanting. Almost two-thirds of these criticisms appeared on a single outlet, ABC news, with the remainder spread across the other networks and the magazines. For example, one ABC story (2/5/87) quoted a home-

House of Representatives passed a bill with great ease. The bill will provide $50 million in emergency funding for the homeless. That is a pittance compared to what is needed, and Congress knows it." By contrast, the institutionalization of mentally ill homeless people was raised nearly as frequently but was usually rejected. The only other policies to receive even a limited hearing were the need for rehabilitation programs, the use of vagrancy laws to forcibly provide shelter, and the use of abandoned buildings to house the homeless.

America is increasingly becoming a nation of housing haves and housing have-nots.

-MIT expert
U.S. News
8/3/87

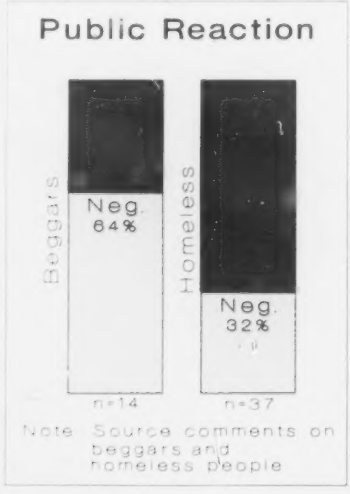
Public Relations

In addition to portraying the homeless themselves, the media provided numerous images of the public's reaction to them. The coverage distinguished between the homeless per se and the beggars or panhandlers whose growing presence in urban areas has sparked debate and municipal legislation. In general, attention turned to the problem of panhandling during the warm weather months and returned to the plight of shivering street people during periods of cold weather.

We need a martial plan, a Berlin airlift for the cities.

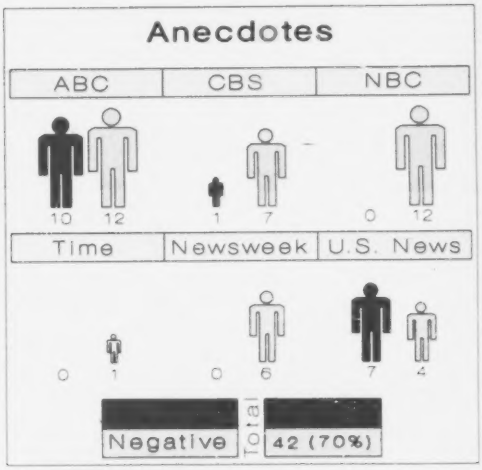
-New York City official
Newsweek
3/21/88

Over two out of three people who were asked their reactions to the homeless (68%) expressed either compassion for their plight or an active defense of their need for support. The remainder expressed irritation or anger at the inconvenience or unpleasantness caused by their presence. Reactions to panhandlers (as a subgroup of the homeless) were reversed, with nearly two-thirds (64%) criticizing them or giving some version of a NIMBY response -- "not in my backyard." Sample: "I want them off my sidewalk. If you think I'm heartless for saying that, can I send then to live on your sidewalk?" - *Newsweek* (12/1/86).



Real People

A major aspect of this story was the heavy use of anecdotes -- personalized accounts or illustrations that stressed the human face of homelessness and efforts to deal with it. Because of their concreteness, visual impact, and emotional appeal, anecdotes occupy a central role in the media's portrayal of the homeless.



Anecdotes could be negative (e.g. illustrations of hopelessness and despair), positive (e.g. innovative local programs), or neutral.

Sample positive anecdote: A *U.S. News* story (2/29/88) dealing with the mentally ill homeless described a woman who lived on the streets despite being raped and beaten "because she believed anyone who gave her food was trying to poison her." After psychiatric intervention and medication, however, "her delusions faded" and she was able to move into a low-rent apartment. Sample negative anecdote: During an ABC (2/4/88) story on a homeless family's travails, the mother talked about her children: "He's five years old and she's seven, and they already know what's crack and what's cocaine. That is terrible, terrible."

We coded 174 personal anecdotes, of which 60 were clearly positive or negative in tone. Among the latter, most (70%) were downbeat, stressing problems and failures. But the overall mix varied sharply among media outlets. On television, ABC featured by far the most (22), with a fairly even division between positive

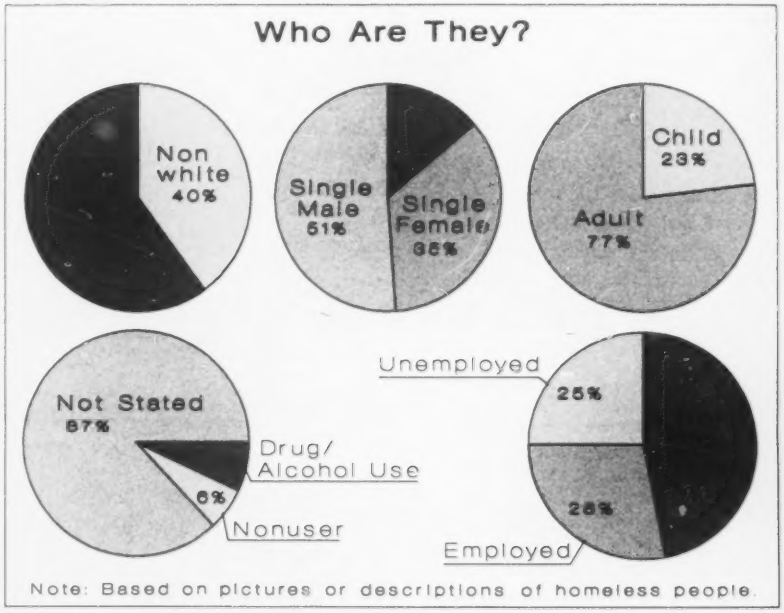
(45%) and negative (55%) anecdotes. The other networks were far more downbeat. NBC offered 12 negative and no positive personal illustrations. Only one out of seven features on CBS was upbeat.

The spread was even greater at the news magazines, where verbal anecdotes were often illustrated or supplemented with pictures (and, in one case, a "photo essay"). *Newsweek* printed six negative and no positive anecdotes, while *U.S. News* emerged as the only outlet to accentuate the positive, with 64% upbeat anecdotes (7 of 11). How much did the tone vary? ABC and *U.S. News* together ran 17 positive anecdotes; the other four outlets combined for only one.

In addition to conveying the tone of coverage, anecdotes provided a concrete image of who and where the homeless are. The location of most vignettes illustrates the geographic bias of national media. New York City accounted for over three times as many anecdotes (52) as any other city, and as many as the next six most heavily covered cities combined. The coastal focus of coverage was also evident in the cities that followed New York in this amount of coverage -- Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Boston. The lure of Manhattan was strongest on television, where New York rated 30 anecdotes. Boston ranked second with only five.

The human face of homelessness presented in personal anecdotes belied the skid row image of down and out unemployed males with alcohol or drug dependence. Just over half the homeless profiled (51%) were single males. One in every seven (14%) were families who lacked shelter, and nearly one in four (23%) were children. Only 7% were identified as drug or alcohol users, and nearly as many were explicitly identified as nonusers. (No mention was made of substance abuse in the vast majority of cases.)

Similarly, the working homeless attracted a great deal of attention. The employment status of homeless individuals was identified about half the time. Among this subgroup, a slight majority (51%) were currently employed. Only one homeless individual was identified as a criminal. Overall, this portrait conveyed an image of the deserving poor who differ from other Americans mainly in their lack of housing, not in any social, psychological, or behavioral deficiency. As CBS's Martha Tischener put it(11/11/86), "People who once gave to the needy now are the needy."



You can't know what it's like until you've experienced it really.

-Homeless mother
NBC, 12/5/86